



# Learning Denied:

## The Case for Equitable Access to Effective Teaching in California’s Largest School District

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective teachers have an enormous impact on the lives of their students. Great teachers can help students who are behind academically catch up to grade-level expectations. By accelerating student performance, they can help close the opportunity and achievement gaps that cut short the college and career dreams of so many low-income students and students of color.

While the importance of effective teaching is widely accepted, its measurement raises a host of questions. For example, just how much influence can top teachers have on student learning? Do low-income students and students of color have equitable access to the most effective teachers? And how do district decisions, policies, and state laws support – or hamper – access to these top teachers? In particular, how do quality-blind layoffs affect students? In this report, we seek to answer these important questions.

In an ideal world, we could draw on a comprehensive set of teacher evaluation ratings based on student-assessment data and other measures, such as classroom observations, to answer these questions. Lacking such data, we used student test scores to estimate the “value added” of tens of thousands of teachers in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) over a three-year period.

Though similar to the strategy employed by the *Los Angeles Times*, which has published a groundbreaking series of stories on teacher effectiveness in LAUSD, there are important differences. While the *Times* compared individual teachers to one another, our analysis focuses on larger district trends and patterns. Our findings provide both cause for hope and deep concern.

On the positive side, we find that effective teaching makes a massive difference in student learning. However, we also find that low-income students and students of color in LAUSD are less likely to be taught by the district’s best teachers, with teacher mobility patterns and quality-blind layoffs only exacerbating the problem.

### OUR KEY FINDINGS

1. **Teachers have the potential to dramatically accelerate or impede the academic performance of their students, whether they are starting below grade level or are ready for more advanced instruction.** The average student taught by a top-quartile, English-language arts (ELA) teacher in LAUSD gained half a year more learning than a student placed with a bottom-quartile teacher. In math, the difference amounts to about four months.

While one top teacher makes a difference, consistent exposure to effective teaching matters even more. Second-graders who started off behind academically and then had three high value-added teachers accelerated to academic proficiency, while students with

consecutive low value-added teachers remained stuck below grade level.

2. **Commonly used measures of teacher quality, including years of experience and “Highly Qualified Teacher” status, are poor predictors of effectiveness in the classroom.**

While teachers do improve over time, with growth especially evident in the first few years, the differences in effectiveness *among* teachers are far greater than those derived from additional years in the classroom.

3. **Effective teachers are inequitably distributed in LAUSD.** A low-income student is more than twice as likely to have a low value-added ELA teacher as a higher income peer, and 66 percent more likely to have a low-value added math teacher. These patterns are even more pronounced for students of color, with Latino and African-American students two to three times more likely (in math and ELA, respectively) to have bottom-quartile teachers than their white and Asian peers.

4. **Quality-blind teacher layoffs in 2009 resulted in the removal of dozens of high value-added teachers from the highest need schools.** At the same time, the district retained thousands of low value-added teachers who happened to have more years of experience. If the district had instead laid off teachers based on effectiveness, only about 5 percent of the ELA teachers and 3 percent of the math teachers actually cut by LAUSD would have been laid off.

These findings should deeply concern LAUSD leaders. Less than half of LAUSD eighth-graders score proficient on the English-language arts portion of the California Standards Test and less than two-thirds of the district’s Latino and African-American students graduate from high school. By ensuring that every student has access to an effective teacher, LAUSD could dramatically improve college and career opportunities for all students and close the wide opportunity and achievement gaps that exist between low-income students and students of color and their more advantaged peers.

In a promising move, the district assembled a Teacher Effectiveness Task Force in 2009. In response to recommendations from this Task Force, LAUSD is taking a close look at its staffing policies and practices and is investing heavily in efforts to improve overall teaching effectiveness as well as the distribution of effective teachers.

The patterns of inequity revealed in this report, however, are not limited to LAUSD. They are consistent with research from other states and are likely representative of what is happening across California. Therefore, the following recommendations are directed to district and state leaders alike:

1. Invest in evaluation systems that can identify both effective teachers and those who are failing to raise student performance.
2. Develop programs and policies that place and retain the best teachers in the highest need schools.
3. Offer teachers the high-quality professional development that leads to significant gains in student achievement.
4. Reform state policies that prevent local leaders from making decisions in the best interests of students, and that have caused the loss of effective teachers from our highest need schools. This includes repealing, once and for all, laws governing “last in, first out” teacher layoffs.
5. Provide the state oversight necessary to ensure that low-income students and students of color are not disproportionately taught by ineffective teachers.

This report demonstrates that, in California’s largest school district, the highest need students are getting the short end of the stick when it comes to effective teaching. While the state and district absolutely must address that injustice, talk and action must go beyond more equitably distributing the existing exceptional teachers. California and LAUSD must also significantly expand the pool of strong teachers. By doing both of these things, state and district leaders can ensure that, in every classroom, there is a teacher who can help every student succeed.